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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## AN IRISHMAN'S LETTERS <sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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THE mortality of great talk is sufficiently tragical, no doubt; but it is less tragical than the mortality of great acting, that most shamelessly wasteful endeavor of the Muses, because—the talker sometimes writes letters. That does not, to be sure, produce a full equivalent: the shining legend of Meredith's talk is not banished or eclipsed by the two copious volumes of his correspondence—any more than the 'cello-playing of Pablo Casals or the celestial sentimentalities of Mr. Paderewski are compensatingly rendered by certain excellent mechanical preservatives. It is but a drab satisfaction that we get from Meredith's *Letters* after we have heard the reports of those who once were listeners in that unique court of the spirit at Box Hill. Nor is it easy to be wholly content with the full and often astonishingly persuasive records of Oscar Wilde's talk that Mr. Frank Harris so devotedly and skilfully gives us in his engrossing *Life* of that bright, bedraggled figure. A master of talk needs an audience—even if it be a cowed and stupidly dazzled audience—as necessitously as a pianist or a singer. The person to whom a great talker writes a letter provides no equivalent stimulus—it is the difference between making love in the presence of the beloved and making love over a telephone: it can be done, but the effect is imperfectly rewarding. And so we would gladly never have read the wonderful things that are set down in the Meredith *Letters* about the exigencies of the heart and the mind, if, in exchange, we might have been, for an hour, one of those enchanted listeners at Box Hill.

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<sup>1</sup> *Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats*, Selected by Ezra Pound. Churchtown, Dundrum, Ireland: The Cuala Press, 1917.

So, too, the fortunate contemporaries of another poet and philosopher and wit who is among the remarkable talkers of our own time—Mr. John Butler Yeats—will not be wholly content with the passages from his letters to his son (a poet of another sort) which have recently been put into a volume of singular beauty issued by Elizabeth Corbet Yeats from the Cuala Press at Churchtown, Dundrum, Ireland. These letters were written to W. B. Yeats in the course of the last six years, during the residence of the elder Yeats in America; and Mr. Ezra Pound has made the selection of excerpts, fearing the while, as he says in an *Editor's Note*, that in making a choice he would "lose the personality of the author"—that "by snatching at salient thoughts" he would seem to show Mr. Yeats as "hurried, or even sententious." He seems to have been perturbed by a fantastic dread of exhibiting the writer of the letters as a dealer in platitudes. If the author of them is shown in these pages as a preacher, says Mr. Pound—"and the vigor of his thought might at times warrant this loathsome suspicion"—the fault is in reality the fault of Mr. Pound, he confesses: "for in the letters themselves there is only the air of leisure. The thought drifts up as easily as a cloud in the heavens, and as clear-cut as clouds on bright days."

Perhaps, in combating the loathsome suspicion that the elder Yeats—portrait-painter, critic, humanist—is a "preacher," Mr. Pound remembered the saying of Meredith, that the born preacher we feel instinctively to be our foe. But that is true only of the preacher who is nothing else. Great talkers have been preachers plus, either Socratically inverted or Shavianly dogmatic. To talk greatly is to occupy a pulpit. It is the didactic element in the recorded talk of Meredith and Oscar Wilde (spiritually incandescent in the one, inexhaustibly amusing in the other) that entangles one in its processes. Great talk without a didacticism that compels or agreeably infuriates would be a saltless thing—an invertebrate thing. In the presence of great talk, the measure of agreement is far from being the measure of delight. Of course, the great talker is preacher plus poet, plus sage, plus wit, plus humanist. We permit him to think that he is teaching us, even though in reality he is merely disengaging some loveliness or some truth that we already know as well as he—but disengaging it with such a conjurer's gesture that it drifts in magical beauty or with a new radiance before

our eyes. Try to imagine Meredith's talk—as we are able quite clearly to reconstruct it—without its eloquent dogmatism: without its note of assured æsthetic or spiritual rectitude. Try to imagine a delicately dubious Oscar Wilde, a Shaw persuaded of personal fallibility: the task is insurmountable.

And so the youthfully venerable Mr. Yeats walks in the full light of tradition when—even in this comparatively pallid record of his vivid and mesmeric talk—he bends a kindly but rebuking gaze upon what seems to him the emptiness of our American civilization or the deficiencies of those who are neither Irish nor French; when his admonishing finger points straight at the delirious vacuity of our national life.

It is said of a character in Mr. St. John Irvine's *Changing Winds* that "he was an Irish gentleman, and he had sometimes been heard to speak affectionately of some person of English birth . . . 'Ah well,' he would say, 'we all know what the English are like, God help them!'" Mr. Yeats has an equally genial regard for the English—a regard from which Americans are not so sharply excluded that we have need to lament. If it is made known to us that the Englishman inherits the results of "the horrid Puritan conspiracy which poisoned life at its sources, making young men and young women remember that the love which caused them to see each other as angelic beings came from the devil," and so producing the England that we know, "where everyone hates and distrusts his neighbor, and where civilization is organized selfishness"—if this is revealed to us, so is it made plain that America is poetically barren: "No American of those I have heard has ever felt the inward and innermost essence of poetry, because it is not among the American opportunities to live the solitary life." Yet Mr. Yeats appears to have heard of Thoreau—perhaps even to have read him, and he seems at least to have heard of Whitman. What would he say, one wonders, if his conceptions of American character and capacity were made to expand sufficiently to entertain the conviction that a poetic dreamer as withdrawn and solitary as William Butler Yeats, as supreme an artist in his own field of spiritual air—MacDowell, the poet in tones—was born in this America of an Irishman's vision, where everyone "frequents the highways and highroads": where "it is implicitly and explicitly an offense to steal away into by-ways and thickets." Once upon a time Mr. Yeats met "a young American poet, handsome, elated

by winning some prize or other for a poem " (Mr. Bliss Carman? Mr. Oliver Herford? surely not Mr. Percy Mackaye!). "He said to me, in his arrogant way, that *poetry is a by-product of life*. 'Why,' I said, 'it is life itself.' 'I don't agree with you,' was all he condescended to reply. This young man expressed the American idea." Evidently he was a typical product of that America seen by Mr. Yeats, "where there is no intellectual life in anything," where "everything is movement and a mode of motion".

Can it be possible that Mr. Yeats is happy living in such a land, among such a people? Occasionally, he says, he meets Englishmen here, and finds them "very peppery and explosive or else mild and broken-hearted." "*They always take me to be English*," observes Mr. Yeats, in complete unconsciousness of the ineffable humor of the remark, "and they get very cross when they find out the truth." Apparently, neither our poets nor our women have yielded him delight. "In true poetry we look for the word, the line, the concrete illusion. In spurious poetry, as it is in America, we look for the idea and having found it then rest." As for the American Woman—"I used to compare her to a temple; perhaps, however, it is a temple carved out of blanc-mange." No, Mr. Yeats cannot have been happy during his years among us.

Yet how shrewd, how charming, how eloquent, how wise in the intuition of a subtle poet and dreamer is the talk of this Irish patriarch at its best—a gifted writer himself and the father and teacher of a great master of English speech. Hear him on the poets: "If he [Shakespeare] had a doctrine, it is that the joyous should be more joyous and the sorrowful more sorrowful. He so loved human nature that nowhere would he curb it; he does not love his mortal servitude, and has no part or parcel with these tame poets who go about with bowed heads celebrating their submission. Have you noticed that Lamb caught something of this fearlessness from his Elizabethan studies? In his note is a certain capricious wildness. . . . In Belgium they improve the singing of caged birds by putting out their eyes. Coleridge and Wordsworth are like those birds; hence their singing has a certain pathos, the pathos of the situation. To think of Lamb is to see his bright eyes humorous and changeable, and a little defiantly vigilant. I see Wordsworth with heavy downcast eyelids, and Coleridge with eyes that yearn up-

wards, as it were, from some abyss of the lost. Wordsworth is a contented slave; Coleridge *might* have thought with Blake and sung the songs of liberty, but his dreadful school-master had done his work too efficiently to fail. I would make a new classification for poets, separating the wild from the tame. . . . To every man is given a soul, in each and all of us is a deep well of tenderness, sometimes called love, and it is the function of poetry and art to fill that well till it is overflowing, tapping all the sources of memory and hope and fear and all knowledge and all intellect and all pleasure and pain; especially must pain yield its bitter savour. . . .”

This is remarkable talk: this is the speech that is native only to those who are “devout worshippers among the haunts of their divinities.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.